

StepFamilies

Succeeding as a Family

The stepfamily, also called the blended or remarried family, is formed when a single, divorced, or widowed parent with children marries a person with or without children. The stepfamily has become an increasingly common family form in the United States. Current estimates suggest that about 50 percent of all first marriages are likely to end in divorce. The majority of these divorced persons will marry again, usually within 2 to 3 years of their divorce from their first spouse. Of all children under age 18, almost 13 percent live in a remarried family.

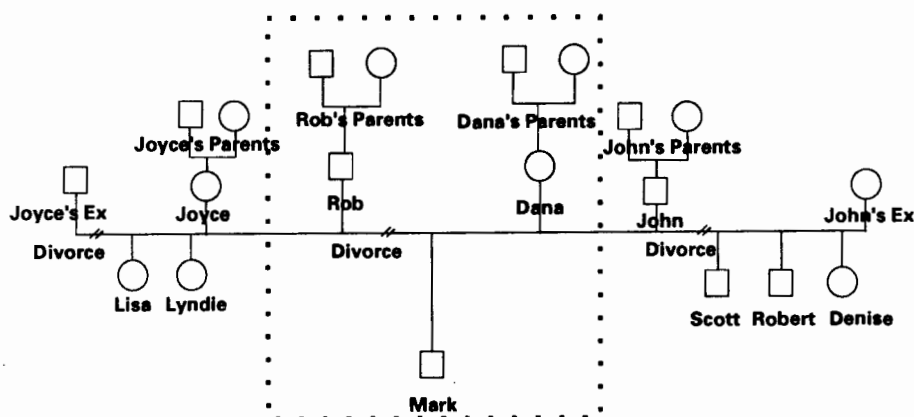
The Setpfamily System

Life in a stepfamily is quite different from that of a couple and their children in a first marriage. The stepfamily situation is more complicated, if for no other reason than there are more people involved. Let's take a look at Mark's stepfamily.

Mark's parents, Rob and Dana, divorced about five years ago. Mark lives with his mother. Both parents have now remarried. Rob married Joyce, who has two daughters, Lisa and Lyndie. Dana married John, who has three children from his first marriage, Scott, Robert, and Denise. As a result of these remarriages, Mark goes from being an only child with two parents to a family situation involving four parents, eight grandparents, five step-siblings, and two houses.

In addition to the dramatic increase in the number of people involved, most stepfamilies face the challenge of resolving numerous issues brought about by the change in family structure. When two families blend into a stepfamily, each family unit brings with it a family history, traditions, rituals, expectations, loyalties, and attitudes regarding roles, rules, finances, and responsibilities. Also included may be different habits, values, and lifestyles. Certainly, each person in both families brings his or her own personality and temperament along with a set of fears, self-doubts, needs, and strong emotions.

In a family tree diagram, it would look something like this:



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**North Carolina
Cooperative Extension Service**

NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY
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Stepfamily Strengths

Family strengths studies, combined with research on stepfamilies, indicate five general patterns in strong relationships:

1. *Family caring* — Strong remarried families strive to be sensitive to each other's needs and to affirm, support, and trust each other.
2. *Family communication* — Strong remarried families communicate frequently, openly, clearly, and directly. They share things important and personal to them, such as their feelings, daily experiences, goals, dreams, joys, and sorrows.
3. *Family pride* — Members of strong remarried families are committed to one another and value the traits that make their family unique. They are proud to be a member of their family, and avoid negative comparisons of themselves with first-married families.
4. *Family unity* — Strong remarried families spend time together in shared activities, a commitment to something greater than themselves, and the recognition of a higher power. They have developed or are developing shared values and goals.
5. *Community and family ties* — Strong remarried families are connected to other individuals and institutions on whom they depend for emotional and practical support. They are willing to seek and accept help when needed.

In addition to these five patterns of strong remarried families, experts identify several possible positive outcomes and strengths for stepfamilies:

- Family members gain exposure to new people and experiences.
- Children see a positive model of adult cooperation.
- More adults are available to meet children's needs.
- A more stable home environment exists.
- More parental models are available.
- There is less stress in the home environment.
- The stepparent is more objective (than the biological parent) and in a position to be a support to children.
- The remarrying adults are more experienced, mature, and motivated.
- Children learn cooperation, flexibility, and sharing.
- Children learn negotiation skills.
- Stepchildren are more adaptable.
- Change in birth order promotes growth.
- Children's development is enriched by variety.
- The circle of friendly adults widens.
- Children learn from a wider variety of people.
- Positive relations develop with stepsiblings.

The Remarried Couple

The real key to the success of stepfamilies lies with the unity of the marital couple. This is quite a challenge for

remarried couples for at least two reasons. First, they do not have the time alone to work on their relationship that first-married couples have. Normally, there are children living in the home from day one. Second, the natural parent-child relationships pre-date the relationship of the remarried couple. The alliances of each spouse tend to be with his or her children first, rather than with the new spouse.

The necessary unity of the couple and the building of a team spirit in the new stepfamily requires a good bit of communication, compromise, and negotiation. The remarried couple needs to talk about issues of concern, conflict areas, parenting and discipline styles, areas of expectation, as well as the nitty-gritty of specific problems. Sometimes, it may be desirable to seek the help of a professional counselor in resolving some of the more difficult or volatile issues. It takes time, lots of patience, and determination to build a solid husband-wife relationship. This is basic to the survival of any type of family.

Issues and Concerns

Stepfamilies face many issues and concerns, including:

Grieving the losses. New stepfamilies must deal with grief. Grief is the natural result of losses that occurred when the families broke up. Stepfamily members experience losses when moving to a new house, a new school, or a new city; changing jobs; or leaving family and friends behind. Perhaps on a deeper level, however, persons in stepfamilies may experience:

- Loss of a relationship with a partner, even if they wanted to leave the broken relationship.
- Loss of the dream of an ideal marriage that was expected in the first marriage.
- Loss of being with a parent on a daily basis.
- Loss of support from family and friends.
- Loss of a familiar role in the family.
- Loss of contact with siblings living with the other parent.
- Loss of freedom that being single permits.
- Loss of hope that biological parents will get back together.

The grieving of these, and other, losses may be expressed as depression, anxiety, or anger. There may also be a feeling of relief if former relationships were very negative. How long the stepfamily members grieve depends largely upon the degree to which they resolved grief at the time of separation by divorce or death, the reasons for the family's dissolution, and the support of others at that time.

Sensitivity to these losses can assist other family members in their grief work in a number of ways. It can: (1) allow persons to talk openly about their feelings, without judgment; (2) allow the preservation of memories; (3) guide the family members toward dealing with the

current situation, and; (4) assist with emotional healing. All this takes time; change does not occur overnight.

Family histories, traditions, and rituals. The new family members do not necessarily know the life history of the others, and vice versa. If you can't say, "remember when," you are at a disadvantage. The biological parent looks at her child and remembers when the child was a cuddly baby, a cute preschooler, the fun times they had together during the child's school years, and how proud the parent has been of the child in times past. The stepfather may look at the same child and remembers that the child plays the stereo too loud and doesn't keep her room very clean.

Members of a stepfamily bring traditions and rituals from former families. Stepfamily members do not necessarily have the same ways of celebrating special occasions or marking important events that are common to them all. It is important to learn the traditions and rituals from each nuclear family represented. The stepfamily can build on these or perhaps establish some new ways to celebrate birthdays, special holidays, shared vacations, or other important activities.

New relationships. In addition to the relationship formed by the remarried couple, with its innate problems, stepfamilies include stepparent-stepchild relationships, altered parent-child relationships, and sometimes stepsibling relationships. Caring, nurturing relationships take time to develop; the expectation of instant love in step-relationships is unrealistic. Establishing friendships in the new family and allowing step-relationships to develop naturally at their own pace will probably be most successful.

Preserving original relationships is also vital in the success of the stepfamily. It is important that the biological parent and child have time to nurture their relationship apart from stepfamily activities. This will reduce the child's sense of loss now that he or she has to share the parent with the new stepparent and any feelings of jealousy toward new stepsiblings.

Divided loyalties. Children in newly formed stepfamilies often feel a sense of divided loyalties. A child may feel guilty if he forms too close a relationship with his stepparent, thinking he is somehow betraying his absent parent. Children need to be helped to understand that forming new relationships does not destroy old relationships. The relationship between a child and her biological parents, regardless of the nature of that relationship, cannot be replaced. It is possible to have a warm, nurturing relationship with a stepparent without being disloyal to a parent.

Parents experience divided loyalties as they observe the developing relationship between their children and the stepparent. When there is conflict between the stepparent and the child, who is the parent supposed to support? The parent will do well to step back and allow this budding

relationship to develop on its own, without interfering, as much as possible.

Everybody's expectations. It is not uncommon for members of stepfamilies to expect that things will be about the same as they were in their nuclear families, which is probably unrealistic. No two families will be exactly alike. Daily routines will be different, the way tasks are carried out will be different, and everybody's personal habits will be different. If stepfamily members see the old ways as the *only way*, they are setting themselves up for a great deal of conflict. Greater success can be expected if members can learn to be as flexible as possible.

Roles, rules, and responsibilities. Individual and family expectations often revolve around who is going to do what, and even what is going to be done. A lot of planning is required to clarify how the stepfamily can operate most efficiently. Decisions about who will sleep where, who takes care of the pets, who will empty the trash and who will set the table, where your favorite reading lamp will be placed, whose bathroom scale is expendable, who will do the shopping or laundry, who will pay the bills, and what the guidelines are for TV watching will take time and patience, compromise, and negotiation.

Old patterns from nuclear families may be incorporated into the stepfamily situation. But new patterns may be necessary in order to meet the needs of the new expanded family.

Financial considerations. Money matters are often a hot topic for stepfamilies. With so many more individuals involved there will likely be more bills to pay, and the stepfamily may have a lower standard of living than its members had in their nuclear families. People who feel that their ex-spouse "took them to the cleaners" may be reluctant to reveal their financial affairs to their new spouses. Those who achieved a certain degree of financial independence during their single-parent phase may be reluctant to return to a position of financial dependency or shared finances. Money paid to or by an ex-spouse may be perceived as an emotional, as well as a financial, commitment to the former family unit. And grandparents of the children concerned about inheritance issues may act in ways that are divisive to the stepfamily.

Trust between spouses is necessary if money issues are to be worked out in a smooth manner. When painful experiences from the former marriage exist, it takes time for trust to build. Trust may need to be established in other areas before the couple can come to trust each other in finances.

Family Meetings

The key to success in any family, including stepfamilies, is effective communication. Many families have found that regular family meetings enhance communication between family members. Family meetings can

serve as a place to plan fun activities, as well as hash out some of the issues or conflicts which exist. These meetings can provide an open forum for the establishment and discussion of rules and how the rules affect all family members. The overall objective in having family meetings is to successfully negotiate solutions as situations arise in the stepfamily.

There are several ways to set up a family meeting:

1. There can be a box into which family members put their grievances. A meeting is held when there are several slips in the box.
2. A regular time each week can be set aside as a time for all to get together and talk.
3. Any family member can request a family meeting.

Certain guidelines may help family meetings work more smoothly:

1. The feelings of all family members count equally, regardless of age.
2. Feelings are accepted at face value, without judgment.
3. Accusations are not allowed. This means that members communicate "I" messages rather than "You" messages. Each person is talking about his or her individual feelings about a situation, rather than trying to lay blame for the situation.
4. After the feelings have been expressed, try to agree on a solution. At this point the adults, because they are more experienced and are responsible for the family, may need to guide the family members to a realistic and workable solution.
5. End the meeting with positive and encouraging comments so that everyone can have a sense of accomplishment and good feelings.

Other Ways To Strengthen Stepfamily Relationships

1. Realize that stepfamilies have emotional, social, and economic problems. Normal experiences for stepfamilies include role uncertainties, loyalty conflicts, conflicts regarding child discipline, unrealistic expectations, and stepparent-stepchild distance or conflict. The existence of these realities in a stepfamily are not unusual; they are normal.
2. Focus attention on the marital relationship. The couple's cooperative partnership is absolutely necessary for building a successful stepfamily. This requires time for emotional bonding and time to discuss issues and concerns that are a part of everyday living. Schedule time for the couple to be alone together.
3. Work toward a quality stepparent-stepchild relationship. The way in which spouses support one another

in their interaction around child-rearing issues is a critical indicator of marital success.

4. The stepparent needs to know how to support and assist the parent in the parental role. At first, the stepparent may simply monitor the stepchild's behavior, much like a babysitter would do, directing disciplinary action to the parent.
5. Share family histories to reduce jealousy, misunderstanding, and favoritism. In remarriage, the stepparent is the outsider in the family's history. He or she is at a disadvantage when he lacks understanding that results from past experiences. Only through family sharing can a stepparent better understand, interpret, and anticipate typical and acceptable interaction between family members.
6. Focus more on increasing family flexibility than family cohesion early in the stepfamily. Family members must learn to adapt to the many changes that occur in the stepfamily formation before they can begin to build intimacy between members. Emotional bonding can occur only after some of the nuts-and-bolts of daily living have been worked out.
7. Help each family member resolve grief over the losses and changes in other family relationships. Until such loss is resolved, lingering attachment to a former spouse may exist. Lingering attachment can cause additional stress for the couple, including uncertainty in the stepparent role. Other losses mentioned earlier need to find appropriate resolution.
8. Reduce loyalty conflicts, which can be stressful for children. For example, children may feel like they have abandoned the absent biological parent if they establish a relationship with the stepparent.

Coping With Stepfamilies

Members of stepfamilies can have warm, nurturing, workable relationships. While the new family may be different from the original families, it can provide a loving environment for the raising of children. Adults who may have experienced a lot of negative emotion due to a divorce now have another chance to build a meaningful marital relationship.

In summary, apply these key ideas to your stepfamily situation in order to build a strong, nurturing environment:

1. Understand your losses.
2. Belonging to two families is okay.
3. Children need not love their stepparent (and vice versa).
4. Stepfamilies need not look and feel like "first" families.
5. Be patient with change.
6. See parents and stepparents as individuals.
7. Talk it out.

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10,000 copies of this public document were printed at a cost of \$1,150.00, or \$.115 per copy.

Published by
North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service